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ABSTRACT

This report examines Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's Annenberg Challenge, Children Achieving, a districtwide systemic reform initiative designed and led by a small core group of district officials and external partners. It was organized around eight core strategies (fair funding, standards, accountability, decentralization, leadership and support for teachers and principals, better coordination of resources, civic and parent engagement, and the all at once philosophy). A combination of factors contributed to Children Achieving's failure to produce sustained improvements and deep changes in practice and included flaws in the theory of action itself, flaws in implementation, lack of capacity, and behavior inconsistent with underlying beliefs and values. Reformers encouraged stakeholders to believe that standards, accountability, and decentralization would result in improved student performance, but this did not occur. Lessons learned include: content standards and accountability measures offer a foundation for instructional change, but produce results only if teachers are given the time and support needed to develop high-quality curricula and alter their classroom methods; curriculum-based, sustained professional development is essential to instructional change; and too much reform can overload schools and teachers. Two appendices present additional reading on Children Achieving and research methodology. (Contains 28 endnotes(SM)

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# The Limits and Contradictions of Systemic Reform:

A Report by
Tom Corcoran and
Jolley Bruce Christman

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2

## *Biographies of the Authors*

Tom Corcoran is co-director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). Prior to joining CPRE, Corcoran served as the policy advisor for education for Governor Florio of New Jersey, director of school improvement for Research for Better Schools, and director of evaluation and later chief-of-staff of the New Jersey Department of Education. His major research interests are the use of research to inform policy and practice in public education, the efficacy of different approaches to professional development, the effectiveness of whole-school reforms, the impact of changes in work environments on the productivity of teachers and students, and the factors affecting the effectiveness of scaling-up strategies.

Jolley Bruce Christman is Principal of Research for Action and has authored numerous evaluation reports and journal articles including "The Five School Study Restructuring Philadelphia's Comprehensive High Schools" and "Taking Stock/Making Change: Stories of Collaboration in Local School Reform" (with Fred Erickson). Her research interests include school reform, gender and education, and participatory evaluation. She received the Council on Anthropology and Education's (CAE) award for Excellence in Ethnographic Evaluation and currently serves on CAE's board. Christman also teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

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# The Limits and Contradictions of Systemic Reform: *The Philadelphia Story*

By

Tom Corcoran
Jolley Bruce Christman

**November 2002**

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ..... iv
Authors' Note ..... iv
About this Report ..... v
Timeline ..... vi
Background ..... 1
*Arrival of Superintendent David Hornbeck* ..... 1
The Results of Reform ..... 3
*Elementary Schools Show Real Gains* ..... 4
*Middle Schools Offer a Mixed Story* ..... 4
*High Schools Struggle* ..... 5
Strategies of Reform within *Children Achieving* ..... 7
Strategy One: Fair Funding ..... 9
Strategy Two: Standards ..... 11
Strategy Three: Accountability ..... 13
Strategy Four: Decentralization ..... 17
*Central Office* ..... 17
*Cluster Offices* ..... 18
*Local School Councils* ..... 20
*Small Learning Communities* ..... 20
Strategy Five: Leadership and Support for Teachers and Principals ..... 23
Strategy Six: Better Coordination of Resources ..... 25
Strategy Seven: Civic and Parent Engagement ..... 27
Strategy Eight: "All at Once" ..... 31
Lessons Learned ..... 33
*Remedial Lessons about Teaching and Learning* ..... 33
*New Lessons about Systemic Reform* ..... 34
In Conclusion ..... 37
Endnotes ..... 39
Appendix A - Additional Reading on *Children Achieving* ..... 41
Appendix B - *Children Achieving* Evaluation Research Methods ..... 43

# List of Figures

Figure 1. *Percent of Students Scoring At or Above Basic in Math by School Level, SAT-9, 1996-2000* ..... 4
Figure 2. *Percent of Students Scoring At or Above Basic in Reading by School Level, SAT-9, 1996-2000* ..... 5
Figure 3. *Percent of Students Scoring At or Above Basic in Science by School Level, SAT-9, 1996-2000* ..... 6
Figure 4. *Performance Levels on the SAT-9* ..... 15
Figure 5. *Diagram of Core Beliefs and Values and their Effects on Centralization and Decentralization in the School District of Philadelphia* ..... 18

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# Authors' Note

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# About this Report

In Philadelphia, the Annenberg Challenge was known as *Children Achieving* and was a districtwide systemic reform initiative designed and led by a small core group of District officials and external partners. This report examines the *Children Achieving* Challenge and the strategies the designers employed to improve teaching and learning in the public schools. Among the conditions associated with the Annenberg Challenge were requirements that two matching dollars be raised for each one received from the Annenberg Foundation and that an independent management structure be created to provide program, fiscal, and evaluation oversight of the grant. In Philadelphia, a business organization, Greater Philadelphia First, assumed these responsibilities, and with them, the challenge of working with the School District to build and sustain civic support for the improvement of the public schools.

The story of *Children Achieving* provides an opportunity to examine the dynamics and effects of systemic reform in a large urban district. The theory of systemic reform seems straightforward. It holds that if districts and states set academic standards for student performance; align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with these standards; measure students' progress; and offer rewards or sanctions to educators based on performance, then school staffs will make the changes in their practice necessary to ensure that students achieve at high levels. From 1996 to 2002, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and Research for Action (RFA) served as the evaluators of the Challenge in Philadelphia and observed this theory being put into practice. CPRE and RFA staff collected data from hundreds of Philadelphia schools, observed classrooms, and interviewed teachers, principals, and other school officials. The District's test scores and other indicators of performance were analyzed, as were the results of two districtwide surveys of teachers. From the analysis of this data, we have drawn some lessons that should inform educational reform in our large cities.

This report summarizes those lessons and draws on findings published in previous reports from CPRE and RFA to provide an overall assessment of the reforms undertaken in Philadelphia in the 1990s. (See Appendix A for a list of other reports). Information on research methods and sources of data are in Appendix B. The report is organized around the eight core strategies of the reform and the rationale, design, implementation, and effectiveness of each strategy are discussed. The report concludes with some lessons drawn from the Philadelphia experience.

# *Children Achieving* Challenge Timeline

## 1994

**August** – David Hornbeck appointed Superintendent of Philadelphia schools.

**October** – *Philadelphia Inquirer* publishes "District in Distress," its first report card on the state of Philadelphia public schools, including information on poverty rates, dropout rates, teachers' salaries, and student performance on the SAT-9.

**November** – As part of a desegregation case against the district, Judge Doris Smith orders the School District to submit a plan for reducing racial disparities in student achievement.

## 1995

**February** – Philadelphia receives a $50 million Annenberg Challenge grant, which is matched by $100 million from Philadelphia corporations, foundations, and federal grants.

**May** – Five months after taking office, Governor Ridge proposes a statewide voucher plan. This is the first of Ridge's three attempts to establish a statewide voucher program, none of which were able to garner needed legislative support.

**December** – Standards Writing Teams, composed of parents, teachers, and community members, are convened; writing of new academic standards begins.

## 1996

**April - May** – SAT-9 administered districtwide in grades 2, 4, 6, 8, and 11.

**September** – All 22 clusters established. Standards Curriculum Resource Guides distributed to teachers.

**December** – Standards in reading/English/language arts, science, mathematics, and the arts adopted by School Board.

## 1997

**February** – Mayor Rendell, City Council President Street, Superintendent Hornbeck, School Board members, and community leaders issue *Realities Converge: This Year is Different*. The authors promised a zero-growth School District budget but "drew a line in the sand" and refused to cut any more school-based programs.

District, city, and community leaders file lawsuit against the state contending that Pennsylvania does not provide a "thorough and efficient" education.

**July** – Standards in final three subjects adopted by School Board.

**September** – Professional Responsibility Index scores made public for the first time. This marks the first reporting period of the first two-year accountability cycle (measuring progress from 1996-1998).

## 1998

**January** – Curriculum frameworks for English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies distributed to all schools; graduation and promotion requirements identified.

**February** – Hornbeck threatens to adopt an unbalanced budget if the state does not provide needed funds, which could lead to the schools closing before the end of the school year.

**March** – District, city, and other officials and interest groups file a federal civil-rights suit against the state, contending that the state's funding practices discriminate against school districts with large numbers of non-White students.

**April** – State legislature responds by passing Act 46, a state takeover law aimed specifically at Philadelphia.

**May** – City Council adopts School District budget, relying on letters of credits from banks to avert an early school closure in the 1998-1999 school year.



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## 1999

**January** – David Hornbeck's contract extended for two more years.

**March** – School District presents budget to City Council with projected $94 million deficit for 1999-2000 school year; refuses to make further cuts.

**November** – John Street is elected Mayor. Philadelphians pass a referendum to change the City Charter to allow the Mayor to appoint all members of the School Board with terms concurrent to his own.

## 2000

**January** – Street selects a new School Board, the first time this has happened in the history of Philadelphia and also appoints the first Secretary of Education for the city, Debra Kahn, who is charged with leading the district's team in negotiation of a new teachers' contract.

**May** – Pennsylvania Legislature passes and Governor Ridge signs the Education Empowerment Act, a state reform and "takeover" bill targeted at 11 school districts, including Philadelphia, with high student failure rates.

**June** – Threat of state takeover crisis in the district during the Republican Convention in Philadelphia is averted by a financial settlement between the School District and Governor Ridge. Still facing a deficit, the School Board cuts the budget and Hornbeck resigns in protest.

**August** – Teacher contract expires, beginning two months of tense negotiating between the union and the Board of Education. The contract is settled before school is disrupted with the intervention of Mayor Street and pressure from Governor Ridge, who threatens a state takeover.

Board of Education announces decision to adopt a corporate style of management. Deidre Farmbry, a veteran Philadelphia educator, appointed Chief Academic Officer.

**October** – Philip Goldsmith, a lawyer and journalist, appointed interim Chief Executive Officer.

## 2001

**May** - District's 22 clusters are replaced by eight academic offices in a cost cutting effort. School Board adopts a budget with $216 million deficit creating a new fiscal crisis with state takeover of the District possible.

**July** – Mayor Street and Governor Ridge sign a Memorandum of Understanding giving the Governor the right to commission an analysis of the District's financial and educational situation. Ridge hires Edison Schools to do the analysis.

**October** – Governor Ridge is appointed to lead U.S. Office of Homeland Security. Lt. Governor Mark Schweiker replaces him.

**December** – Philip Goldsmith resigns as CEO of the District. State executes a "friendly takeover". The school board is replaced by a five-member School Reform Commission, with three members appointed by the governor and two by the mayor. Governor Schweiker appoints James Nevels as the interim chairman. Other four members appointed in January.

# Background

The Philadelphia School District has the daunting responsibility of providing an effective education to 215,000 students, most of whom live in poverty and must cope with the stress and problems associated with severe economic disadvantage. Eighty percent are children of color who are also affected by the racial discrimination directed at their families and communities. The district faces challenges common to other urban school districts — low achievement and high dropout rates, inadequate funding, decaying buildings, and high teacher and principal turnover. This story is not new and these and related problems have persisted for decades. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, in 1994, published a report about the Philadelphia schools called "A District in Distress" that outlined the grim realities in the schools at that time:

- Less than half of Philadelphia students entering high school in 1989 graduated four years later.
- Students in only 15 out of 171 elementary schools scored at or above average on nationally normed reading tests.
- Test scores were highly correlated with poverty levels.
- Philadelphia per-pupil funding was the lowest in the area.

In 1995, some hope arrived. Philadelphia was one of 16 locations nationwide designated to receive large grants through the Annenberg Challenge program. Walter Annenberg, benefactor and former Ambassador to Great Britain, announced an unprecedented gift of $500 million for public education in America and challenged cities around the country to "speed the movement" of educational reform initiatives. One condition of the Annenberg Challenge was that each of the grants, varying in amounts from $10 to $50 million, had to be matched two to one with additional dollars raised by each city. Philadelphia's $50 million grant was successfully matched with $100 million raised by Philadelphia corporations and foundations, and federal grants.

## *Arrival of Superintendent David Hornbeck*

Immediately prior to the launch of the Annenberg Challenge in Philadelphia, a new superintendent, David Hornbeck, had been recruited by a coalition of Philadelphia business, civic, and government leaders. Hornbeck was an advocate of systemic reform and had been one of the architects of Kentucky's Education Reform Act. He believed that content and performance standards, decentralization, and accountability mechanisms should be used in concert to transform entire school systems rather than seeking improvement school-by-school. His theory of action, as articulated to CPRE and RFA researchers, summarizes *Children Achieving's* reform agenda:

*Given high academic standards and strong incentives to focus their efforts and resources; more control over school resource allocations, organization, policies, and programs; adequate funding and resources; more hands-on leadership and high-quality support; better coordination of resources and programs; schools restructured to support good teaching and encourage improvement of practice; rich professional development of their own choosing and increased public understanding and support; the teachers and administrators of the Philadelphia schools will develop, adopt, or adapt instructional technologies and patterns of behavior that will help all children reach the district's high standards.*

Philadelphia's leaders welcomed Hornbeck's approach. They saw high standards and strong accountability as a tonic for Philadelphia's poorly performing schools. New leadership with a persuasive strategy combined with the award of the Annenberg Challenge grant and the receipt of the matching funds brought hope that something would finally be done to turn the city's schools around.

To put his theory into practice in Philadelphia, Hornbeck developed a 10-point plan that outlined the steps the district would take to make dramatic improvements in the Philadelphia schools. Hornbeck believed that these strategies would bring about dramatic improvement in Philadelphia. He set an ambitious goal of having all students achieve at or above the standards in 12 years. These points were:

1. ***Set high expectations for all students*** — so that every child gets the "basics" and a lot more.
2. ***Set standards to measure the results of reforms*** and use these measures to hold educators accountable.
3. ***Shrink the centralized bureaucracy*** and let schools make more decisions.
4. ***Provide intensive and sustained training to staff*** so they can meet the tough challenges ahead.
5. ***Make sure all students are healthy*** and ready to learn.
6. ***Provide students with the community support*** and services they need to succeed in school.
7. ***Provide up-to-date technology:*** one computer for every six students, books, and clean and safe schools.
8. ***Engage the public*** in understanding, supporting, and participating in school reform.
9. ***Ensure adequate financial and other resources,*** and use them effectively.
10. ***Be prepared to address all these priorities together,*** all at once, and for the long term — starting now.

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# The Results of Reform

*"...where there were consistent improvements in instructional practices and sustained gains in student achievement, there was strong school leadership focused on instruction, a sense of professional community, curriculum-based professional development, and effective use of data including review of student work."*

We will never know if *Children Achieving* would have produced the performance gains that Hornbeck envisioned. Political and financial problems brought Hornbeck's tenure to an end in the summer of 2000, and the *Children Achieving* initiative essentially ended with his departure. What we do know is that modest gains were made in the first five years (See Figures 1, 2, and 3 for SAT-9 data). Based on the magnitude of those gains and the trends appearing in the data, it seems unlikely that the district would have achieved the ambitious goal of having the student population on average reach the standards by 2007 or 2008. Nevertheless, gains were made. Here we describe the progress made at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The *Children Achieving* reformers did not initially articulate distinct strategies for elementary, middle, and high schools. The design was to a large extent a one-size-fits-all approach. However, there was some customizing of the design to address issues unique to different levels of schooling. At each level, the challenges of motivating students and staff varied and different supports were needed to make the changes. The district's focus on literacy in the early elementary grades reaped significant benefits because elementary teachers were provided with guidance about how to implement research-based instructional practices in their classrooms and with the materials and tools they needed to do the job. But this kind of districtwide focus on instruction was missing in the middle and high schools and many of these schools floundered attempting to design their own instructional interventions.

Clearly, the issues faced by the high schools were the most daunting. Faculty were asked to make major changes in curriculum and instruction with little guidance or support. They were asked to take ill-prepared students to higher levels of performance without being offered plausible strategies for helping their students catch up. They were asked to create small learning communities and introduce school-to-work programs, service requirements, and senior projects at the same time. All of this had to be done in large schools in which many faculty members were isolated and demoralized, and many were strongly resistant to the reforms. Attention to these issues might have helped high schools to improve student achievement. The experience in Philadelphia suggests that reform strategies must be customized to address the issues at each level of schooling to have a chance of success and there must be strong guidance and support about curriculum and instruction to produce results.

Nevertheless, some schools made significant progress and they shared some common attributes regardless of grade level. Qualitative research in 41 schools indicated that where there were consistent improvements in instructional practices and sustained gains in student achievement, there was strong school leadership focused on instruction, a sense of professional community, curriculum-based professional development, and effective use of data including review of student work. In many of these schools, parents were accepted as partners in improving school performance. While these factors were important at all grade levels, these conditions were seen more frequently in elementary schools than in middle schools or high schools.

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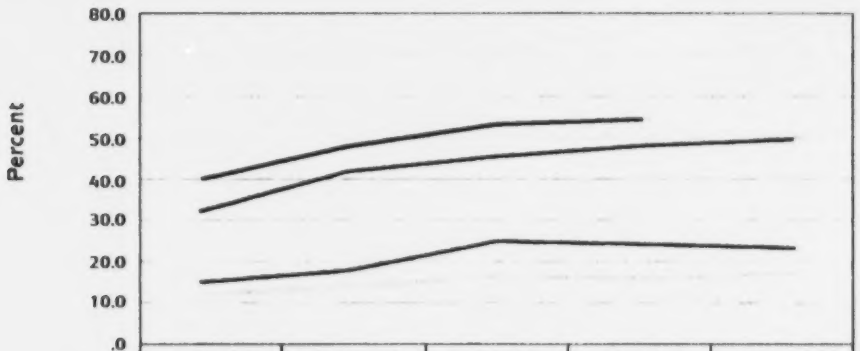
**FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF STUDENTS SCORING AT OR ABOVE BASIC IN MATH BY SCHOOL LEVEL, SAT-9, 1996-2000**




| | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 | 1999-2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ES | 32.2 | 41.9 | 45.3 | 47.8 | 49.1 |
| K-8 | 40.4 | 48.5 | 53.7 | 54.5 | NA |
| MS | 15.7 | 18.5 | 25.2 | 24.4 | 23.2 |
| HS | 11.6 | 13.8 | 15.9 | 15.2 | 16.4 |

School Year

## *Elementary Schools Show Real Gains*

A critical mass of elementary schools made significant gains in student performance in reading as measured by test scores, but there were not comparable gains in mathematics. The strong curricular focus on early literacy had a major impact on student achievement as did the establishment of full-day kindergarten. In the elementary schools, professional development focused primarily on the literacy curriculum and research-based teaching practices. And small learning communities were built on the foundation of the working relationships teachers had established in grade-level groups. This helped teachers to learn how to use the new materials and practices associated with the balanced literacy initiative as they were able to share their ideas, struggles, and questions with their small learning community colleagues. The literacy initiative gave teachers in the small learning communities a shared focus and purpose that in turn strengthened professional community. The result was continuous progress in improving reading achievement. There was no comparable district initiative in mathematics in the elementary schools. Since elementary teachers often lack adequate preparation to teach mathematics in the first place, they could not be expected to improve mathematics instruction on their own. The lack of a coherent district strategy produced a predictable result in most schools; there was little improvement in mathematics achievement. In mathematics at least, standards, incentives, and decentralization were not sufficient to generate performance gains.

## *Middle Schools Offer a Mixed Story*

Middle school students made modest gains on the SAT-9. While eighth-graders made some progress during the first three years, their scores flattened in the fourth year, and their math and science scores declined in year five. Mathematics scores were especially low in the middle schools as few teachers had strong mathematics backgrounds and the mathematics curriculum was not well aligned with the SAT-9.



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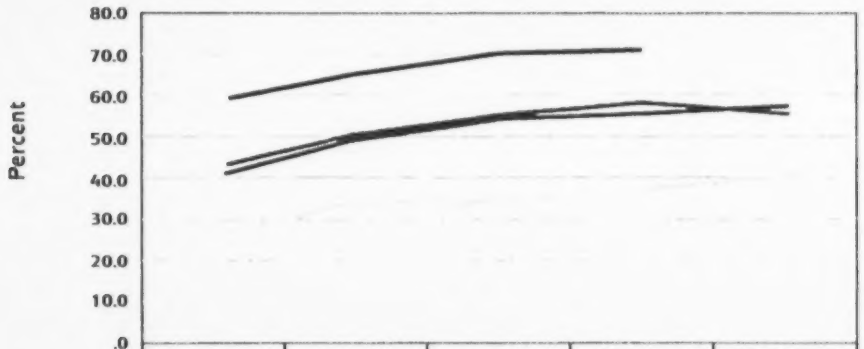
**FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF STUDENTS SCORING AT OR ABOVE BASIC IN READING BY SCHOOL LEVEL, SAT-9, 1996-2000**




| | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 | 1999-2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ES | 40.4 | 48.7 | 54.4 | 55.1 | 57.7 |
| K-8 | 59.9 | 65.1 | 70.4 | 71.3 | NA |
| MS | 43.3 | 50.5 | 55.0 | 58.5 | 55.8 |
| HS | 25.6 | 34.0 | 33.6 | 37.0 | 40.7 |

**School Year**

Nevertheless, most middle school teachers felt the *Children Achieving* reforms had positive impacts on their schools. In fact, they were more positive about the reforms than their counterparts at the elementary and secondary levels. Faced with an onslaught of demands from the central office, middle school staff often chose to work on those pieces of the reform with which they were most comfortable. So they focused on the creation of small learning communities (SLCs), the development and implementation of thematic curriculum, and test preparation. While well intended, the thematic curricula developed by middle school staff often lacked rigor and distracted them from developing more rigorous standards-based curricula. As has been discovered by others, it proved difficult to build strong interdisciplinary programs on a foundation of weak disciplinary curriculum.

Student discipline was a serious problem in middle school classrooms, undermined attempts to improve instruction, and contributed to high teacher turnover. This combination of poor student discipline and high teacher turnover produced chaos in some schools. In the highest poverty middle schools, 46 percent of the teachers in the 1999-2000 school years were new to their schools in the last two years. In the lowest poverty middle schools the figure was 34 percent.[1]

## *High Schools Struggle*

High school students were performing poorly on district tests at the beginning of *Children Achieving* in 1996 and were still doing poorly five years later. Test scores were flat during the first few years of the reform and then edged up slightly in the last three years. High school teachers, facing huge gaps between the entering achievement of their students and the district's performance expectations, also showed the least support for the reform. The architects of the reform lost a rich opportunity to increase teacher buy-in and improve implementation when they decided to ignore the teacher networks that had been nurtured during the previous reform era. Even highly committed high school teachers felt excluded from the reform. Many high schools lacked effective principals which only further impeded the possibility of success. Academic


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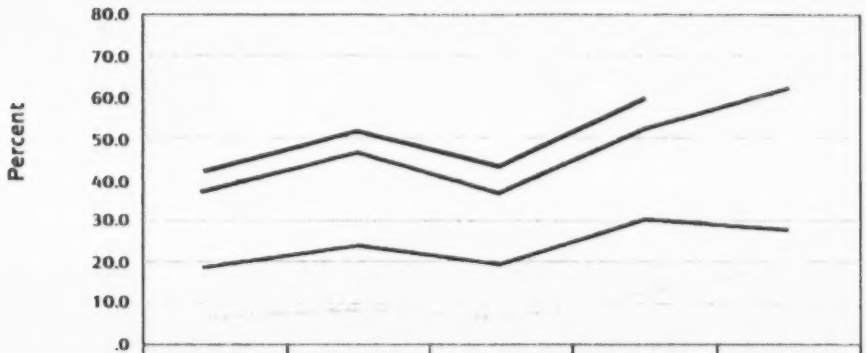
**FIGURE 3. PERCENT OF STUDENTS SCORING AT OR ABOVE BASIC IN SCIENCE BY SCHOOL LEVEL, SAT-9, 1996-2000**




| | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 | 1999-2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ES | 37.1 | 46.4 | 36.6 | 52.2 | 61.5 |
| K-8 | 42.2 | 51.9 | 43.2 | 59.3 | NA |
| MS | 18.1 | 23.7 | 18.8 | 30.2 | 27.4 |
| HS | 4.9 | 8.0 | 5.2 | 12.0 | 19.1 |

School Year

departments were weak to begin with and were eliminated in many high schools as school leaders focused their resources on supporting SLCs. But SLC coordinators were overwhelmed with administration and disciplinary responsibilities, and could not fill the leadership vacuum. Thus, there was inadequate instructional leadership and teachers were left to cope as best they could.

The improvements in achievement in Philadelphia can be explained largely by intensive test preparation and increasing familiarity with the content and format of the test. In fact, the pattern of early gains in performance in the elementary and middle schools follows a pattern seen in other localities when new tests are introduced: scores are suppressed initially and then rise for two or three years before leveling off. This pattern raises questions about the amount of change in teaching and learning that actually occurred in Philadelphia.

Although the gains in student achievement were modest, there was enormous celebration in the district when the gains were announced each year and a huge investment in telling this "good news." To show that progress was being made, the district created categories of proficient, basic, and below basic to differentiate levels of student performance. However, because the initial level of student performance was so low, leaders divided the below-basic category into three subcategories to make student progress visible. It was difficult for many civic leaders in Philadelphia to feel that substantial progress was being made, since even after five years, while some students progressed, many remained in the below-basic category. In addition, civic leaders' expectations had been raised and they expected progress to come quickly and steadily. The reality of poor performance belied the exuberant claims of progress coming from the central office and increased skepticism about *Children Achieving's* potential for success.



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# Strategies of Reform within *Children Achieving*

Eight strategies served as prime movers within *Children Achieving*'s complicated theory of action. Examining these strategies in retrospect, one can better understand the problems that arose and the disconnects with the realities in the schools that surfaced as *Children Achieving* was being implemented. It also becomes easier to understand why its impact was limited. These eight key strategies were:

### 1. *Fair Funding*

Seek increased state funding and a new state funding formula that was fair to Philadelphia's schools.

### 2. *Standards*

Set high standards to outline the knowledge and skills that Philadelphia students should acquire.

### 3. *Accountability*

Create an accountability system to assess how schools perform annually and reward progress or sanction decline every two years.

### 4. *Decentralization*

Move decision-making back to schools and neighborhoods by organizing clusters of schools around high school feeder patterns, developing small learning communities within schools, and creating local school councils.

### 5. *Leadership and Support*

Prepare teachers and administrators to understand, support, and effectively implement the reforms.

### 6. *Better Coordination of Resources*

Provide students with the social services and supports they need to succeed in school.

### 7. *Civic and Parent Engagement*

Build support from citizens for the *Children Achieving* reforms and involve parents as leaders and active participants in their children's schools.

### 8. *Doing It All At Once*

Address all of the elements of *Children Achieving* at once in order to move the system forward.



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## Strategy One: Fair Funding

*"The entire reform effort in Philadelphia can be viewed as a calculated risk by Superintendent Hornbeck that he could secure additional funds for the district in time to sustain the reforms before the Annenberg Challenge grant ran out."*

One tenet of the 10-point plan of *Children Achieving* was to "ensure adequate financial and other resources, and use them effectively." While this seemed like an obvious point, over the course of the reform it became a source of aggravation to some and a disappointment to many. The struggle between state and city leaders over the costs of adequately financing the schools and the state's responsibility for funding became a primary point of contention and debate within the city and overwhelmed discussions about the progress of instructional reforms.

When *Children Achieving* was launched in 1995, Philadelphia's population was shrinking, businesses were leaving the city, and the number of jobs in the city was declining. Consequently, the tax base supporting city services, including the schools, was shrinking. And local taxes were high. Philadelphia residents were paying higher property tax rates than residents in surrounding counties and they were paying a city wage tax of nearly four percent. The wage tax was a disincentive to businesses that might consider moving into the city and an obstacle to economic growth. In this economic environment, it was hard to increase local financial support for the public schools.

State support for the Philadelphia schools also was declining. The state had frozen its funding formula in 1993 and from that time onward, state aid to Philadelphia did not increase in response to increases in enrollment. On a per-pupil basis adjusted for inflation, the value of state funds coming to Philadelphia actually decreased by 5.9 percent between 1993-1998.

As a consequence, Philadelphia's per-pupil expenditures were significantly lower than those in surrounding Pennsylvania school districts. In the five-county region around the city, some districts were spending twice as much per pupil as Philadelphia. Average starting salaries for teachers in the suburbs were more than $3,500 higher than those in Philadelphia and maximum salaries were nearly $10,000 higher. As a consequence, there was a steady stream of teachers leaving the city for the suburbs.

So Philadelphia faced the task of educating the state's neediest children with resources that most suburbanites would have regarded as wholly inadequate for the provision of good public schools. The only solution to the fiscal problems of the district was increased state aid, but persuading the legislature to alter the school funding formula and increasing state taxes was a difficult assignment in a large and conservative state in which rural and suburban interests often clashed with those of the cities.

The entire reform effort in Philadelphia can be viewed as a calculated risk by Superintendent Hornbeck that he could secure additional funds for the district in time to sustain the reforms before the Annenberg Challenge grant ran out. He believed he could demonstrate the efficacy of additional funding by raising test scores and persuading either the courts or the legislature that fiscal reforms were needed to provide equal opportunity for Philadelphia's children and that they would result in improved performance. *Children Achieving's* leaders pursued multiple, overlapping strategies to generate the political will to obtain increased city and state funding for Philadelphia public schools. One strategy was to gain the endorsement of the city's civic and business leaders for the reform agenda through their involvement in such groups as the Annenberg Challenge coordinating and oversight committees that developed the initial work plans. A second was to show evidence of improved student performance to prove that *Children*


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*Achieving* was a reform worthy of an increased investment of state and local dollars. A third was to make a convincing case that the district was being well managed by cutting costs and documenting what would be needed to maintain student progress. A fourth strategy was to renegotiate the teachers' contract to give management more flexibility to address student needs and increase labor productivity. A fifth strategy was to catalyze and nurture grassroots organizing efforts, and develop a strong group of parents willing to fight for increased funding in the state capital. The sixth strategy was to go to court.

Each year, Superintendent Hornbeck delivered a budget statement to Philadelphia's City Council that outlined the expenditures for the coming year. With the budget documents for the 1997-1998 school year, district leaders distributed a white paper titled, "Realities Converge: This Year is Different." This paper set a new tone and raised the political stakes. The paper outlined three legal actions being taken against the state by the district, the city, and other plaintiffs such as the Philadelphia chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The first was a lawsuit filed in the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court that claimed the state had violated its obligation under the state constitution to provide a "thorough and efficient" education for all children in Pennsylvania. The second was a lawsuit filed in the United States District Court for the Eastern Division of Pennsylvania charging the state with violating federal civil-rights law by shifting funding away from Philadelphia, the district with the largest concentration of minority students in the Commonwealth and "thereby increasing their concentration and isolation both within their school district and among students in the Commonwealth."[2] The third action was to file a brief in the State Supreme Court to support a prior Commonwealth Court decision that the state should pay the city extra funds to support court-mandated desegregation remedies.

The language in the white paper was strong. "The School District does not take these actions lightly. Yet, Philadelphia's children deserve better treatment from the State...The State's continued denial of its basic constitutional responsibility simply leaves no alternative. The indisputable fact is that the Commonwealth has denied its moral and constitutional mandate to provide a thorough and efficient education to the City's school children..."[3] In subsequent speeches, Hornbeck pursued these themes expressing considerable moral outrage. His implicit charges of racism inflamed the governor and other state leaders who found the claims outrageous. Battle lines were drawn, and meaningful discussions between district and state leaders ceased.

The conflicts between state and city leaders over the adequacy of the financing of the schools and who should be responsible for funding overwhelmed discussions about the progress of instructional reform. Civic and business leaders who were initially supportive of *Children Achieving* because of its strong accountability system became increasingly critical of Hornbeck's confrontational style which they saw as an inappropriate strategy for securing public support or state cooperation.[4] They were not eager to confront a governor to whom they were looking for economic support for business in the city, despite increasing evidence that Pennsylvania lagged far behind other states in its funding of public schools. (In January 2001, *Education Week* gave Pennsylvania a grade of "D-" on funding equity in comparison to other states.) Moreover, the leadership of the business community was changing and some of the new leaders favored the governor's voucher proposal. In addition, as mentioned earlier, while they saw modest gains on student test scores, student performance remained extremely low in the city and this seemed in conflict with the claims made by Hornbeck that student performance was greatly improved.

The fair funding cause, ardently led by Superintendent Hornbeck, became a primary focus of the central staff and drained time and energy from the hard work of improving teaching and learning. In many ways, the funding and fiscal issues were the Achilles Heel of the reform, the point of vulnerability that took attention away from the schools, and gave those opposed to *Children Achieving* a way to reframe the issue from inadequate financial support for public education to Hornbeck's leadership style.

# Strategy Two: Standards

*"...for teachers who had little or no exposure to local or national initiatives promoting instructional reform or who doubted that their students could achieve the standards, the curriculum frameworks were not enough... Their curriculum and instruction were heavily influenced by the district's standardized test, the SAT-9. In their classrooms, narrow test preparation prevailed over the standards."*

The architects of *Children Achieving* believed that adopting written standards defining what students should know and be able to do would create a basis for assessing student performance; serve as a guide for teachers, administrators, and parents; and motivate all parties to improve their work. The creation of standards was a significant step for the Philadelphia school district — representing a change from accepting any growth in achievement as adequate to striving for mastery. The new standards, partially based on those developed by national professional organizations, established goals for the skills and knowledge students should acquire by defining specific benchmarks at grades 4, 8, and 10. But the standards did not prescribe what material should be taught or how it should be taught. This was left to the teachers in each school who were expected to establish a curriculum that would prepare students to reach the standards.

The process used to create the content standards was inclusive and brought together teachers, administrators, parents, principals, and community members who served on committees that met over several months before reaching final consensus and ultimately presenting their work for Board approval. As these groups worked together, they learned much about efforts across the country to promote standards-based education and the implications of standards for school and classroom practices. They became committed to standards as an approach to improving education, but the committees were disbanded upon completion of the standards documents and the district did not capitalize on these groups' new knowledge and enthusiasm by using them as advocates and leaders in the reform.

Standards were a major departure from the previous administration's standardized curriculum. The previous district curriculum outlined the specific topics to be taught at every grade level, but did not specify expectations for what students should know and be able to do. With the adoption of standards, teachers were given more latitude about what to teach and how to teach it, but no latitude about the goals for student learning. However, teachers varied widely in their response to the district standards.[5] Most used the standards as they had the standardized curriculum. Typically, they used them as checklists, checking off the topics covered, and saw their relevance for the content of their courses, but failed to see their implications for their teaching practice or for student performance.

Part of the problem with the implementation of standards was timing. They were developed in the spring of 1996 and distributed to teachers that summer. The School Board adopted them the following December. Since the new accountability system was already in place, teachers were expected to implement the standards immediately. Yet no time had been allowed for review of the standards, revision of curriculum, purchase of new instructional materials, or preparation of staff.

Most teachers found that the standards were not specific enough to guide the development of lessons and asked for more direction. In the second year of the reform, this concern was widespread. Teachers were frustrated by the lack



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of time to review and discuss the standards and the lack of specificity about what was to be taught at each grade level. They wanted more specific examples and guidance so they could understand how to put the standards into practice in their classrooms. They needed help in determining what materials were aligned with the standards and time to make the necessary adjustments in curriculum.

In response to these concerns, district personnel developed curriculum frameworks, which offered more specific instructional activities and strategies for all subjects by grade level. The curriculum frameworks were intended to help teachers understand what they needed to do to have their students achieve the new standards. Although the frameworks did not provide a curriculum, they did identify constructivism as the pedagogical philosophy underlying the district standards.[6] They offered examples of how to enact that philosophy by providing sample activities and model units that addressed the standards and defined grade-specific skills. The frameworks did help some teachers move toward standards-based instruction. However, many teachers complained that the curriculum frameworks did not provide them with adequate guidance.

In fact, the frameworks did not offer recipes for success. The recommended practices did not always rest on solid empirical bases, but rather a philosophy of instruction and a promise of better outcomes. Moreover, they rested on tenuous assumptions about teachers' knowledge of subject matter and pedagogical skills. And they assumed that teachers were able to manage their classrooms. Data from classroom observations and teacher interviews indicated that competent teachers who held high expectations for children found the frameworks to be useful tools. They helped teachers develop curriculum units, lesson plans, and classroom-based assessments. However, for teachers who had had little or no exposure to local or national initiatives promoting instructional reform or who doubted that their students could achieve the standards, the curriculum frameworks were not enough. Many of these teachers were overwhelmed by classroom management problems and by the complexity of the changes suggested by the frameworks. Their curriculum and instruction were heavily influenced by the district's standardized test, the SAT-9. In their classrooms, narrow test preparation prevailed over the standards.

Bridging the distance between where teachers were — in their knowledge of subject matter, their use of instructional practices, and their beliefs about what students can learn (students who came with tremendous deficits) — and where they needed to be, in order to help their students reach higher standards, proved to be a daunting task in Philadelphia, as it has across the country.

# Strategy Three: Accountability

*"....many teachers believed that the Performance Responsibility Index was unfair and held them accountable for factors outside of their control... A greater effort by district officials to educate teachers and the public about the PRI and to respond to their criticism may have helped to build more confidence in the system."*

A good accountability system allows the public to see the progress being made in schools and leads to accountability for district leaders as well as teachers and students. It builds the capacity of schools to become learning organizations by providing multiple indicators that stimulate reflection and examination of practice, and mid-course corrections. *Children Achieving's* leaders created an accountability system based on the Performance Responsibility Index (PRI), a measure that included several indicators of performance. The index included math, reading, and science scores of students on the SAT-9; promotions to the next grade level in elementary and middle schools; the proportion of ninth-grade students graduating from high school in four years; and student and teacher attendance. The system operated on a two-year cycle, and the PRI provided each school with biennial performance targets. The goal was to motivate school staff to take actions that would improve their results on these indicators and raise their PRI score. Schools were rewarded or sanctioned based on their progress toward two accountability goals: meeting or surpassing their PRI performance target and decreasing the number of students scoring at the lowest levels on the SAT-9 in reading, math, and science.

Admirably, Philadelphia developed one of the most inclusive testing programs in the country. The accountability system offered schools strong incentives for increasing student participation in the testing program. By including all students, even those who were lowest performing and those with learning difficulties and language differences, the district risked lowering its overall performance. The fact that test scores increased in spite of this increased inclusion was a notable achievement.

The introduction of the accountability system launched a major cultural change in the district. It focused everyone's attention on student achievement and school improvement. It provided incentives for school staff to seek out and adopt innovations that they might have ignored or resisted otherwise. And it initially satisfied business, government, and civic leaders' insistence that the district make data about student performance accessible to the public.

But, the PRI had some serious flaws. The index relied on a cross-sectional look at student achievement, focusing on the performance changes in specific grades rather than looking at student growth year to year. Additionally, the PRI relied on an off-the-shelf commercially-produced test, the SAT-9, that was loosely aligned with district standards in all subject areas. Using the SAT-9 as the primary measure of student performance instead of looking at multiple measures of student performance that were closely aligned to the content standards undermined the PRI's credibility as a measure of student performance and focused teachers' attention on preparing students for a standardized test rather than helping them reach the standards.

And since the PRI did not take into account the backgrounds of students or their entering level of achievement, schools that had made substantial improvement prior to 1996 found themselves at a relative disadvantage compared to schools that had made little progress prior to the introduction of the accountability system. The schools in which students were already making gains in learning had to reach for even higher levels of performance after 1996 whereas schools with very low performance in 1996 had improvement targets that were more easily attained.



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A third and more serious problem had to do with the metric used to determine student progress. Students' actual test scores were not used in the PRI. Instead, students were placed in one of six categories of performance (See Figure 4) based on their scores and only movement from a lower category to a higher one counted as a gain for the school. It was the change in the distribution of students in these categories that counted — not the actual change in test scores. These categories were arbitrarily defined and little was known about the amount of learning needed to advance from one level to the next or the relative difficulty of moving a student from Below Basic 1 to Below Basic 2 versus moving from Basic to Proficient. Experience in other locales such as Kentucky suggests that these advances posed quite different challenges and that students could make significant gains but not advance into the next category. Schools received no credit for the increased learning of a student who advanced from the lowest score in the Basic category to the highest because actual test scores were not used in calculating the PRI.

In addition, the index was complicated and not easily understood by teachers, parents, or the public. Some people were able to articulate the components of the index, but the complicated calculations used to create the final numbers made even supporters of accountability skeptical about the PRI's accuracy, purpose, and impact. It created a false precision that many educators mistrusted. And their instinctive mistrust was well founded. There was significant measurement error in the indicators used. The increase on the PRI required to reach the improvement targets set for the schools were often smaller than the amount of statistical error present in the calculations of the index. To put it simply, schools might easily fail to reach their targets or surpass them because of statistical flukes. This created a sense of arbitrariness that is not acceptable in systems that affect people's lives and professional reputations.

The calculation of the staff attendance factor in the PRI was also perceived by many teachers as punitive because long-term illnesses and maternity leaves were treated as unacceptable absenteeism.

Philadelphia's teachers were not opposed to accountability. Teacher surveys indicated that 63 percent of teachers believed the PRI had the potential to benefit students. However, many teachers simultaneously believed that the PRI was unfair and held them accountable for factors outside of their control. They felt students' lives outside the classroom had more impact on achievement than they did. A greater effort by district officials to educate teachers and the public about the PRI and to respond to their criticisms may have helped to build more confidence in the system and greater collective responsibility for the results. The district did set up an independent panel of experts chaired by Andrew Porter of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This panel made numerous recommendations for studying the PRI and improving it. While the district was responsive, these changes came too late to restore teacher confidence in a system that had enormous influence on their work and their reputations.

There was also a disjuncture between reform goals and the accountability timetable. The two-year timeframe used by the PRI was too short for schools to implement significant reforms in curriculum and instruction. This added to the frustration among teachers and principals who were struggling to make improvements. Consider what principals and teachers faced. They would receive their PRI scores for the first year of the two-year PRI cycle at the beginning of a school year and they then had only seven months before students would be tested again. Their budgets were set; the summer professional development was over, so there was little they could do if they needed to make a large gain to reach their PRI target except to directly prepare students for the test. Test preparation was a rational response under the circumstances, and it was the typical response in Philadelphia.

Intensive qualitative research in a sample of district schools identified schools that were pursuing effective strategies for improving instruction, but failed to reach their PRI targets.

**FIGURE 4. PERFORMANCE LEVELS ON THE SAT-9**

| Categories of Performance | Definition |
|---|---|
| Advanced | Superior performance beyond grade-level mastery. |
| Proficient | Solid performance, meaning students are ready for the next grade. |
| Basic | Partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for satisfactory work. |
| Below Basic III | Inadequate mastery. |
| Below Basic II | Little mastery. |
| Below Basic I | Very little mastery. |

Source: T. Luhm, E. Foley, and T. Corcoran, *The accountability system: Defining responsibility for student achievement.* Philadelphia: The Children Achieving Challenge, 1998.

These schools were penalized even though they were on observable, defensible paths to improvement. The PRI underestimated the time needed to bring about meaningful change and created unrealistic expectations and burdens for staff. Rather than creating school cultures that encouraged organizational learning and internal capacity building, the PRI was a punitive measure that highlighted school failures. Focusing on preparation for the tests was perceived as the only sure way to avoid embarrassment and sanctions.

Only schools identified as making "low progress" received feedback on the quality of their instructional efforts or were designated as needing the School Support Process, a comprehensive intervention that brought additional funds and assistance to schools. Reviewing only those schools that failed to meet their targets reinforced the idea that feedback was a form of punishment and that reflection and change were only necessary when there was measurable failure. Rather than promote a districtwide culture of continuous progress, the PRI encouraged many educators to seek quick fixes and adopt coping strategies. The School Support Process could have been an aide to improvement and did, in fact, help some schools improve in real ways, but this process was avoided rather than embraced because it was seen as punitive and a symbol of failure.

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# Strategy Four: Decentralization

*"Principals and teachers were told they had more authority and choice, but they didn't feel more empowered. The steady flow of mandates, in fact, reduced their options. School leaders were overwhelmed by mandates and felt Children Achieving was top-down and prescriptive."*

The designers of *Children Achieving* intended to give principals and teachers more autonomy to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. This central tenet was articulated early on by Hornbeck: "Those who sit closest to the action are in the best position to decide what mix of resources...will most effectively accomplish the goal of raising student achievement."[7] The radical decentralization proposed by the superintendent seemed to be a significant operational change for both central office and school staff who were accustomed to a top-down, prescriptive district culture.

The reform architects established new structures to give schools more authority over decision-making. These new structures included clusters, local school councils, and small learning communities. Newly established cluster offices working with one comprehensive high school and its feeder elementary and middle schools were expected to provide focus for improvement initiatives in the schools, mobilize resources to support improvement, build a responsive relationship with neighborhood organizations and community members, provide professional development, coordinate social services, and strengthen K-12 curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Local school councils were supposed to actively engage parents in the decision-making of the schools, moving them into more influential roles than the ones usually offered by home and school associations. Small learning communities, sub-units of schools with typically fewer than 400 students across grade levels, were meant to improve the conditions of teaching and learning and to motivate teachers and students by strengthening relationships and personalizing schooling.

## *Central Office*

From the beginning, central office staff members seemed unclear about how to operationalize decentralization and ambivalent about how it would impact their roles and responsibilities. The Strategic Action Design stated that the new functions of the central office were to "set standards, assess progress, monitor for equity, and act as a guide and provider of resources and support,"[8] but these tasks were complex and challenging to a central office with limited capacity. Central office staff struggled to figure out how to be both "hands-off" and more helpful to schools. They found the capacity-building role to be in conflict with the core value of school autonomy. Initially, some central office staff members interpreted decentralization so literally that almost every central office action proposed became a topic of contention.[9] There were extensive debates about whether to develop a core group of consultants to help the schools, whether to organize the content standards by grade level, how to define best practice, how to organize professional development, and so on. Decentralization posed challenges for those charged with both making it happen and with improving system performance. At times the two goals seemed in conflict. (See Figure 5 for a diagram of the core beliefs and values and their effects on centralization and decentralization).

It also became increasingly apparent that decentralization placed too heavy a burden on many schools. School staffs were unready to assume so much responsibility. Decentralization assumed that school staff had the know-how and the resources to improve student achievement, but simply lacked the opportunity or authority to make the decisions that mattered. But, in Philadelphia, school staffs often did not have the



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**FIGURE 5. DIAGRAM OF CORE BELIEFS AND VALUES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON CENTRALIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**

capacity to manage the new demands of decentralization at the same time that they were trying to make the changes in classroom practice required by standards-based curriculum and instruction. They were hampered by shortages of time, resources, and direction. In addition, neither central office nor school staffs had access to professional development that might prepare them to carry out their new responsibilities. The central philosophy was clearly stated, but the capacity to put it into practice often was lacking.

A turning point came in 1998 when reform leaders viewed with dismay disaggregated district test data that showed certain groups of students were being left behind. For example, in 1998, the four-year graduation rate was almost 30 points lower for students in families on welfare than for all students. Central office staff were concerned that the reform's equity objectives were being neglected. These data convinced central office personnel that they had to take a more prescriptive approach. They concluded that they had to send stronger messages to schools about what and how to teach.[10]

## *Cluster Offices*

The 22 clusters varied considerably in their capacity to guide school improvement. Resource inequities contributed to this variation. The first six clusters formed in the 1995-1996 school year received significantly more funding for several years than the 16 created in the fall of 1996. The rationale was that the original six were funded at the level required to be effective and it was important to demonstrate this to the state as part of the district's argument for increased funding. In addition, the cluster leaders varied in their ability to raise external funding. As a consequence, the per-pupil expenditures for cluster staff and services ranged from $81 to $475 in 1996-1997. Clusters also varied considerably in size, staff experience, demographic characteristics, and the achievement levels of their student populations.

Clusters were expected to provide and broker professional development through the Teaching and Learning Network (TLN) which was part of the Office of Leadership and Learning, the professional development arm of the district. The




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TLN coordinators and facilitators were based in cluster offices so that they could serve the needs of schools and teachers. However, the district's ambivalence about decentralization was apparent as TLN staff also reported to central administration. TLN staff were expected to offer workshops to help teachers understand and implement the reforms. In fact, much of their time was devoted to communicating new policies and initiatives mandated by central office, causing one TLN coordinator to declare in 1999, "I'm not rolling out one more reform. Enough is enough." Over time, TLN staff became somewhat more strategic about allocating their time. In some clusters they spent substantial time in elementary schools focusing on early literacy initiatives, which contributed to elementary school students' achievement gains. In contrast, their work in secondary schools was often spent orienting teachers to the SAT-9, providing coaching on test preparation materials and activities, and supporting the many new and inexperienced teachers.[11]

Differences in the abilities and strategies of the cluster leaders led to variation in their clusters' success at rallying schools to a common purpose and providing services that met the needs of schools' staff, especially principals. About a third of the cluster leaders defined their role as service providers, supporting school initiatives. About half defined their role more proactively, seeing themselves as catalysts and mobilizers of reform. A few saw their role as line officers in the district bureaucracy, serving traditional administrative functions. Indeed, central administrative leaders generated confusing messages about the roles of clusters and cluster leaders. One debate that raged during the first years of *Children Achieving* was whether cluster leaders ought to have rating authority over principals. Initially, reform leaders believed that rating authority would interfere with cluster leaders' ability to coach and mentor principals. But some cluster leaders were adamant that they needed rating authority in order to exercise the influence over principals they considered necessary to accomplish school improvement. When rating authority was granted, it reinforced the message that the cluster was just another rung in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Interview data showed that school staff generally saw the cluster office as just another form of centralized authority, a way station in the top-down dissemination of information and program mandates.

The most successful cluster leaders were able to leverage funds and resources to provide more professional development for teachers, more technology, more instructional materials, and even additional staff. They kept the focus on instructional improvement and supported their principals while acting as buffers between the demands of the central office and the schools. Professional development in these effective clusters focused on improving instruction.

One particular cluster exemplifies how this combination of actions affected the progress of its students. From the beginning of his tenure, the cluster leader worked with principals to establish an instructional priority for the cluster and to target cluster staff and resources to support that priority. The building administrators believed that literacy ought to be the focus. They were willing to turn back some of their school funds to the cluster so that additional staff could be hired as coaches for the cluster's teachers. Cluster staff members were chosen for their knowledge and experience in early literacy and supported adoption of a literature-based approach and a strong phonics program in the schools. This cluster's success in teaching reading in the early grades eventually captured the attention of district leaders who subsequently adopted it as a system-wide program of improvement. Unfortunately, this was a rare instance of strategies demonstrated as successful in one cluster being replicated in the others.

In general, most cluster offices lacked clear, coherent strategies for instructional improvement and the necessary resources and staffing. Many cluster leaders were unable to leverage additional funding and resources to augment the work of principals and teachers. As new mandates were rolled out by the central office, the cluster staff became the enforcers of these mandates rather than sources of support for implementing the reforms. The work of the cluster offices was

negatively affected by the sheer number and scope of district initiatives and directives, by staff turnover, by uneven and inadequate resources, by the resistance of some teachers to change or to participate in uncompensated professional development, and by the low morale and turnover among principals who felt ignored and maligned by district and cluster leaders.[12]

## *Local School Councils*

Local school councils built upon a school-based management/shared decision-making initiative launched by Hornbeck's predecessor, Dr. Constance Clayton, in the late 1980s. That effort focused on giving more autonomy to principals and teachers in budget and staffing decisions, but it stalled due to resistance from both central administration and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT).[13] Under *Children Achieving*, local school councils were intended to reinvigorate the original initiative and take it one step further by including parents as full partners in the reform. Council members were supposed to make policy decisions at the local school level including decisions on the budget, external resources, safety and security, and facilities management.[14] Early in the reform, the PFT, however, objected to the implementation of school councils as proposed by the district and this resulted in a joint PFT-District agreement that limited the jurisdiction of local school councils to discipline issues such as suspension and expulsion and school safety. In addition, the agreement changed the council membership to require that teachers have a majority instead of the proposed 50-50 membership.

The district established a stiff criterion that 35 percent of all eligible households had to participate in the election of the parent representatives in order for a school council to be certified and have full authority. This was a formidable obstacle for most schools and, in the end, many councils were unable to obtain official certification. In addition, the district set broad guidelines for councils, but offered only limited training to council members on how to carry them out. This was a problem as most council members lacked experience for their new roles. For many parents unused to being active in schools, the new role was especially challenging and intimidating. The success of local school councils rested heavily on the willingness and ability of principals to lead and guide them, but school councils were threatening to many teachers and principals since they implied a new balance of power that was unfamiliar and unsettling. The reform architects underestimated the amount of support parents, teachers, and principals needed to make strong local school councils a reality. In the end, most schools never formed certified local school councils and only a few councils exercised significant influence over their schools.

## *Small Learning Communities*

Like local school councils, SLCs were the extension of a previous reform effort. In 1988, the Pew Charitable Trusts provided a $13 million grant for the restructuring of neighborhood comprehensive high schools into smaller units that would provide more intimate environments for teaching and learning. By the mid-1990s, this reform initiative had stalled, but under *Children Achieving*, the district gave it new life and mandated that all schools — elementary, middle, and high schools — be divided into SLCs. The focus of SLCs was to be the improvement of teaching and learning, although from the beginning there was considerable ambiguity about the authority of SLCs over curriculum, scheduling, student assignment, and other key decisions affecting teaching.

Analysis of CPRE/RFA survey data generated two important findings about SLCs in elementary schools: (1) well-implemented SLCs were positively associated with a school climate conducive to effective teaching, and (2) SLCs were positively associated with teachers' perceptions of the strength of their professional community (a measure of teacher collaboration and shared responsibility for student learning). Because a good school climate and strong professional community were also associated with increases in student achievement, these findings suggest that SLCs made at least indirect contributions to positive learning outcomes for young people. Unfortunately, similar analyses could not be conducted for middle and high schools. However,

qualitative data collected in a sample of schools indicates that SLCs contributed to safer, more orderly school environments in secondary schools.

Observations in classrooms and at small learning community meetings and interviews with staff and students indicate that the impact of SLCs on school climate was stronger than on curriculum and instruction. There were several reasons for this. Having SLCs take responsibility for student discipline contributed to a sense of greater order and improved communication, but focusing on these responsibilities too often overshadowed the intended instructional purposes of these new organizations. Student discipline often became the primary responsibility of small learning community coordinators, particularly in middle and high schools. This meant that they had little time to devote to instructional tasks. Second, SLCs were required to adopt a thematic focus. Hastily adopted and underdeveloped themes did not produce rigorous curricula and the result was often an emphasis on isolated events such as assemblies and field trips. These activities exposed students to a theme and built the identity of the small learning community, but diluted potentially powerful interdisciplinary connections. Third, at the middle and secondary school levels, the small learning community coordinators could not be expected to lead or judge the quality of teaching and curriculum work in all of the core subjects. At best, they had expertise in one subject. With the elimination of departments, one or two teachers were left on their own to develop curriculum in each subject and they seldom received feedback on their teaching from an observer qualified in their field. In the middle schools where there were many first- and second-year teachers, this lack of subject-matter guidance contributed to a chaotic teaching situation. Teachers at all levels reported that they had more frequent informal discussions about students with their small learning community colleagues than they had had prior to the creation of SLCs. This provided the opportunity to design instruction to meet the individual needs, abilities, and learning styles of students. But these discussions typically focused on student behavior and seldom developed into the systematic examinations of students' work needed to help students ratchet up their performance.

Interviews conducted with teachers in the middle and high schools and data from the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS) revealed that the creation of SLCs also generated new inequities in some schools. When teachers were permitted to form these communities voluntarily, the result was often an inequitable distribution of teacher talent across the SLCs. A related problem arose from rostering students for most of their classes in the SLCs which meant that not all students had access to the full curriculum. Teachers of specialized subjects such as foreign languages, and higher mathematics and science courses were not available to all students if those teachers were assigned to a small learning community. And data from PELS indicated that students who had performed poorly in middle schools were less likely to select their high school small learning community which meant that they were more frequently placed in the SLCs that offered less rigorous curricula.[15] In general, the quality of curriculum offerings varied across the SLCs and the elimination of subject-matter departments meant that there were no forums for quality control of curricula in the core subjects.

The stated purposes of SLCs were to strengthen teaching and learning and create stronger bonds and better understanding among teachers and students, but SLCs were assigned many administrative and managerial functions. SLC coordinators were asked to ensure compliance with mandates and did not have the leadership, skills, knowledge, time, or resources needed to help teachers make deep changes in teaching and learning. Developing strong SLCs required more time and stronger incentives than were provided. SLCs needed more budgetary authority and more consistent and larger blocks of time to meet and plan. Small learning community coordinators needed help with discipline and administrative functions so that they could devote time and energy to instruction. And departments or subject-matter networks were needed across SLCs to guide curriculum development, provide quality control, and ensure equal access to the curriculum.

Clusters, local school councils, and SLCs were intended to improve the quality of schools but each ran into significant problems that prevented it from being effective in the majority of schools. Capacity, acceptance, and authority were the common problems. There was also too little professional development to prepare participants to carry out their new roles. Principals, in particular, were ill prepared to work with local school councils and SLCs. Accustomed to being in charge, the vast majority of principals were unable or unwilling to consult and collaborate with teachers and parents. In addition, resources were limited and the complicated and constant flow of district mandates imposed enormous burdens on those responsible for leading the new structures. They struggled to meet the new demands, often losing sight of their central purpose in the process. Finally, uncertainty and ambiguity surrounded the decentralization initiatives; there was insufficient specification of roles and relationships and in the face of such confusion, people often fell back on what was familiar and comfortable.

As district leaders retracted from decentralization and began to give more direction to school staffs, there was no articulation of a policy change. The result was a disconnect between what was actually happening and the rhetoric from the top. In reality, as the reform progressed, schools lost autonomy as new responsibilities and district mandates piled up. They also were under tremendous pressure to improve student achievement. But district leaders continued to frame the reform in terms of decentralization. Principals and teachers were told they had more authority and choice, but they didn't feel more empowered. The steady flow of mandates, in fact, reduced their options. School leaders were overwhelmed by mandates and felt *Children Achieving* was top-down and prescriptive. The Philadelphia experience does not clarify the ongoing debate over the merits of centralized versus decentralized strategies of school improvement or resolve questions about what powers and responsibilities should rest with the district and what should be delegated with schools. In the end, Philadelphia was a confused and muddled amalgam of the two approaches.

# Strategy Five: Leadership and Support for Teachers and Principals

*"The lack of support and respect for principals was a serious weakness in Children Achieving and contributed to its ultimate failure to bring deep and lasting changes to the district's classrooms."*

Adopting standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment measures requires deep changes in teaching that experience and research suggest only occur over extended periods of time and with intensive support. Under *Children Achieving*, there was a dramatic increase in professional development opportunities for teachers and the richness and depth of these opportunities improved over the course of the reform. Unfortunately, the vast majority of initial offerings focused on compliance with mandates, and did not provide teachers with the subject-matter knowledge or curricular guidance they needed to help their students meet the standards. An exception was the professional development offered by the Urban Systemic Initiative in mathematics and science which will be discussed below. As a consequence, these experiences had little impact on classroom instruction. But later programs, such as the district's successful summer content institutes, proved more effective in helping teachers improve their instructional skills. The content institutes built upon what had been learned in the Urban Systemic Initiative and many teachers reported that these professional development programs deepened their understanding of subject matter and led to changes in their teaching. Professional development for other staff, however, was quite limited. This was particularly true for principals who faced new responsibilities but were offered little support or preparation.

The increase in professional development opportunities for teachers in Philadelphia was a significant accomplishment. For years, professional development had been a low priority and teachers typically attended a few sessions each year that were usually unrelated to instruction. Under *Children Achieving* expectations changed. Teachers were expected to improve their practice and the district was expected to offer programs worthy of their time and attention. However, *Children Achieving* had many components and most required teachers to acquire new knowledge and skills. The district initially spread its professional development resources across these initiatives and across the 22 clusters. The result was a lot of activity but much of it was superficial, providing information about mandates and procedures rather than opportunities to examine and improve classroom practice.

Thus, in spite of the increase in professional development opportunities, many teachers were poorly prepared to implement standards-based instruction and many held beliefs that ran contrary to it. The professional development opportunities should have provided teachers with tools and instructional materials that were aligned with the standards. In classrooms in which good instruction was observed, the teachers were often involved in sustained professional development efforts and had access to high-quality curricular materials. Many of these teachers were involved with the Urban Systemic Initiative or with well-designed literacy initiatives. In both cases, the professional development was focused and extended over time, and supported with good curriculum materials.

Ongoing, focused professional development is hard to achieve without support and leadership from principals. Yet few Philadelphia principals saw themselves as instructional leaders or saw professional development as part of their jobs and the reform leaders did not seem to understand how this limited the possibilities of accomplishing the instructional changes they were seeking. Instead of preparing principals to be instructional leaders, central office staff just demanded more of them. Nowhere in the



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rhetoric or the design of *Children Achieving* was the essential role of principals as site-based instructional leaders recognized or developed.[16] Principals felt disempowered and disrespected. They received little or no professional development to help them deal with their new responsibilities and the demands from central office staff. They were exposed to new pressures from the public release of the PRI scores for their schools. Public and civic leaders could see which schools were "working" and which were not and that burden fell heavily on principals. Morale was low and the turnover rate high. It is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain a reform agenda without stable leadership in the schools. The lack of support and respect for principals was a serious weakness in *Children Achieving* and contributed to its ultimate failure to bring deep and lasting changes to the district's classrooms.

Central office staff itself struggled to manage the implementation of the reforms and juggle the demands of the 10-point plan. As Foley[17] noted, "Most of the Superintendent's inner circle were knowledgeable and thoughtful about standards-based, systemic reform, but many other staff at the central office did not have a clear understanding of these areas." Shifting central office personnel to the cluster offices meant fewer people doing more work. Central staff turnover was also high, and new people stepped in and learned as they worked. Little attention was paid to their development needs.

Instead of building the capacity for principals, cluster leaders, small learning community coordinators, and central office staff, the leaders of *Children Achieving* just kept asking them to do more. They did not include school leaders in planning and development and neglected development of the workforce until it was too late to make a difference. In the end, a demoralized school leadership was disengaged from *Children Achieving*, disenfranchised from the process, and angry and resentful.

## Strategy Six: Better Coordination of Resources

*" Inadequate staffing and training limited the effectiveness of the Family Resource Network as budget cuts forced the elimination of many positions. This added to the perceptions of teachers and principals that they were not being supported in their work and in areas, such as health and school safety, which they believed critical to their ability to do their jobs well."*

*Children Achieving* was intended to improve the quality of support services available to students, helping students and families gain access to a broad range of community services, and coordinating activities of service providers. The *Children Achieving* reformers understood the negative effects of poverty on children and on their capacity to learn. As Hornbeck noted in 1994: "Community services and supports can make the difference between success and failure. Children who are unhealthy, hungry, abused, ill-housed, ill-clothed, or otherwise face the kinds of problems outside the school born of poverty will not achieve at high levels. Therefore it is imperative that initiatives be dramatically expanded to provide the necessary services and supports to reduce the impact of these major barriers to learning."[18]

However, resources were scarce and services limited so district leaders focused on advocacy and coordination with community groups and government agencies to broaden and deepen their impact. The Family Resource Network (FRN) was the district office assigned this responsibility.[19] FRN staff did not see themselves as direct service providers, but rather as advocates, working with civic and community agencies to coordinate youth and family services. In addition, they were supposed to consolidate services within the district itself. The FRN moved responsibility for student support services from the central office to cluster offices by providing each cluster with an FRN coordinator.

In 1996-1997, the FRN identified four goals: to improve student attendance, student health, school safety, and family and community involvement.[20] While central office and cluster staff understood how the FRN intended to accomplish these goals, teachers and principals did not. However, 92 percent of teachers expressed the belief that the FRN could help their students.[21] Communications about the role of the FRN and responsibilities were inadequate and led to confusion about its purpose. The FRN was not designed to be responsive to the daily problems that surfaced in schools, but rather to build capacity in clusters and schools to make better use of existing resources and to work with community and civic organizations.

Leaders of some community and civic organizations that worked with the FRN praised their efforts. They felt they had a focused point of contact within the district for the first time, but others expressed wariness about working with a district bureaucracy that seemed confused about whether its role was delivery or coordination of services. This role confusion about delivery versus coordination was found within the FRN staff themselves as they struggled to decide what should be done by the district and what could be handled best by outside agencies.

The significant improvements in student attendance seen in Philadelphia were partially due to the efforts of the FRN, such as the installation of truancy courts in schools to address chronic tardiness and absence. There were also increases in the numbers of students who received immunizations, health insurance, and eye examinations.

However, inadequate funding undermined the work. Inadequate staffing and training limited the effectiveness of the FRN as budget cuts forced the elimination of many positions. This added to the perceptions of teachers and principals that they were not being supported in their work and in areas, such as health and school safety, which they believed critical to their ability to do their jobs well.



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## Strategy Seven: Civic and Parent Engagement

*"As district leaders became more adamant in their arguments for fair funding, supportive civic leaders, especially, were reluctant to voice their concerns or raise questions. They feared giving ammunition to political leaders who wanted to discredit the reform and the Superintendent."*

Given the financial crisis threatening the district, the architects of *Children Achieving* understood that they needed the support of corporate and civic leaders, community residents, and parents. And initially, the *Children Achieving* reform plan was championed by the business and foundation communities, civic leaders, and the mayor. The reform's mandate to change all parts of the system all at once made sense to them as they were eager to get the job done. In addition, public reporting of school-by-school test data and data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income level helped Philadelphians understand the gravity of the situation in their public schools. Extensive media coverage and debate over the design of *Children Achieving* and its new superintendent made public education a front-page story in a town where, as a grassroots leader described it, "there had been apathy and little discussion."[22]

However, interviews conducted with more than 40 of Philadelphia's leaders revealed that, in fact, they saw standards, accountability, and decentralization as common sense ideas rather than as a theory of education improvement that would need ongoing assessment and revision. They also held differing ideas about what was wrong with the city's public schools and competing interpretations of whether *Children Achieving* produced significant improvement in the schools.

Business leaders believed that the city's economic future rested on the quality of its schools and many linked the city's economic decline with inadequate public schools. They judged the school system inadequate because of its inability to hold middle-class families in the city. When Hornbeck approached Greater Philadelphia First, a not-for-profit association of the Philadelphia region's largest employers, asking them to house the Annenberg *Children Achieving* Challenge, its board of directors agreed to take on the responsibility, hoping it would give them greater influence with district leaders. Over the course of the reform, they were informed about the progress of *Children Achieving* on a regular basis, and some board members became personally engaged and helped raise the matching dollars required by the Annenberg Challenge grant.

But economic circumstances changed and some business leaders became disillusioned with the reform approach and its leader, Superintendent Hornbeck. Several factors contributed to the decline in support from the business community. First, because Annenberg Challenge funds were used to build a district infrastructure to support reform, Greater Philadelphia First leaders could not point to specific ways in which the grant funds made a difference in schools. They also complained that they did not receive adequate or accurate reporting from the district on how the funds were spent. Some worried that too much of the money was being spent on administration. Additionally, some were frustrated by the failure of reform leaders to outsource more of the district's service contracts to private companies. All of these factors fueled their perception that the district was inefficient and not a good steward of public funds. A turning point in the relationship between the superintendent and the business community came in 1998, following the negotiation of a new contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Business leaders felt that Hornbeck failed to secure needed changes in the teachers' contract and that this seriously limited the possibility of improving performance. They began to doubt the effectiveness and potential of *Children Achieving*.



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In the meantime, board leadership at Greater Philadelphia First changed and the new leaders took a more conservative stance. As local corporations (e.g., CoreStates Bank, Scott Paper, SmithKline, and others) were taken over by companies based outside of Philadelphia, the commitment of corporate leaders to the well-being of the city seemed more tentative. In addition, Greater Philadelphia First expanded its membership base to include regional corporations which meant that the organization represented suburban as well as urban interests. By June 2000, when Superintendent Hornbeck resigned, only four of Greater Philadelphia First's founding 23 Chief Executive Officers remained. The new leaders were strong supporters of the Archdiocese system and were attracted to Governor Ridge's proposal for vouchers which they believed would be good for business because it might stem the flow of middle- and working-class families from the city, thereby buoying the local economy and strengthening the quality of the workforce. They tried to persuade Superintendent Hornbeck to work with the governor on this issue, but he would not. In 1999, members of Greater Philadelphia First stood with the governor when he proposed a voucher plan for the state.[23] The message was clear: the business community, once supportive of Hornbeck's initiative, had lost faith in the local reform effort and lost confidence in its leader.

Civic and grassroots leaders offered the strongest praise for the *Children Achieving* reform plan. They expressed pride and gratitude that Philadelphia had a plan — something they felt other cities lacked. Many saw economic inequality and racial discrimination as the most significant problems confronting schools (and the broader society) and called for a redistribution of resources that would provide students from groups who had traditionally performed poorly with better-designed and more intensive supports to ensure their school success. They perceived the city's schools as just one of several key social institutions failing poor children of color. Hornbeck's persistent fight for fair funding made him a hero to these grassroots leaders even as support for him crumbled in the business sector.

When the reform seemed to falter as discontent among principals and teachers became more visible and test scores flattened, many civic leaders began to feel that the plan needed rethinking and modification. But it was difficult to generate public dialogue about the reform's limitations or its accomplishments. It was difficult to raise questions, offer a different perspective, or mount an argument in the face of the compelling logic of "We must change all levels of the system at once." One civic leader crystallized the problem: "The completeness of his [Hornbeck's] vision wasn't amenable to questioning. You couldn't tamper with any part of it."[24] The centrality of Hornbeck also posed an obstacle to open discussion and revision. Criticism of the plan was tantamount to criticism of the superintendent's leadership. And finally, the larger political and economic contexts played significant roles in discouraging open dialogue about the reforms. As district leaders became more adamant in their arguments for fair funding, supportive civic leaders, especially, were reluctant to voice their concerns or raise questions. They feared giving ammunition to political leaders who wanted to discredit the reform and the Superintendent. When it began to appear that *Children Achieving* would not deliver the sustained gains in achievement that its leaders had promised, there was widespread disillusionment. Many of the leaders we interviewed expressed the feeling, "We've done the best and the most that can be done, let the state take over."[25]

Parents were also viewed as partners in the *Children Achieving* reform. Reform leaders believed that parents were essential to their success and parent involvement was a central tenet of the reform design. To them, parental involvement went beyond traditional roles, such as being members of parent teacher organizations or attending school events. They wanted parents to be part of school-based decision-making teams and, together with teachers and principals, direct school policies and manage resources. The reformers also wanted parents to become a political voice for additional funding and assistance for Philadelphia schools.

While their vision seemed clear, they found it difficult to carry out. Engaging urban parents in the schools proved to be difficult. Overwhelmed with trying to provide for their families, facing long workdays, and feeling disenfranchisement from civic life, parents faced severe obstacles to getting involved. There were few precedents for parents to serve as partners in school governance. Resources to educate parents and community members about new expectations and roles were limited.

Some principals embraced and encouraged parents to be partners, and parent involvement increased. Too often, however, principals were not prepared to engage parents in school leadership roles and were threatened by their involvement. As reported in a CPRE/RFA report on parent involvement, "reformers did not take into account how deeply unsettling shifting the balance of power among schools, parents, and community would be to many principals and teachers. Reform planners underestimated what it would take for schools, especially in low-income, racially-isolated neighborhoods, to turn themselves around and work with parents as collaborators in school reform."[26]

A few schools successfully worked with intermediary organizations to enable parents to identify their concerns, raise controversial issues, work through conflicts, and address issues that impacted their children. But, these instances were rare and were successful only when there was strong leadership in the organization, the school, or from a particular parent. Increasing parent involvement was a worthwhile goal, but in Philadelphia, the impact was marginal, and in the end, had little influence on policymakers or schools.

A reform of the magnitude of *Children Achieving* required internal and external political support that could be sustained for many years. Without sustained and organized support, the voices of critics tended to drown out those of supporters. This was especially true after it became clear that the improvements in student performance were coming more slowly than an impatient public had been led to expect.

Philadelphia's experience shows how difficult it is to build resilient civic coalitions in the harsh circumstances created by inadequate funding. It reveals the problems that arise for reform leaders as they try to communicate complicated messages about standards, accountability, and decentralization to civic and business leaders who want "solutions." It points out the importance of setting expectations and preparing the public for the kinds of gains that might be anticipated.

## Strategy Eight: "All at Once"

*"Overloaded by the reforms, many school staffs were unable to focus their efforts to improve. They could not translate mandates into clearly defined and manageable instructional priorities. This resulted in widespread frustration among teachers and principals."*

The *Children Achieving* Challenge was comprehensive in its scope and ambitious in its goals. The 10-point plan was complicated and sometimes difficult to understand. It placed a high burden on school personnel. Each point had multiple facets and they were not always presented or rolled out in a coherent fashion. Staff in many schools were overwhelmed and confused by the various demands made on them by the central office or clusters. Teachers faced development of new curriculum in every subject as well as new assessments, new work arrangements and relationships, new demands for professional development, new procedures for obtaining services for students, new evaluation procedures, and other changes. They were told this had to be done "all at once." What made sense to administrators at the top was perceived as "hell on the ground" by principals and teachers. What seemed connected and aligned on paper often was fragmented and out of sync in practice. At the heart of the problem were disjunctures between the philosophy and norms about teaching and learning that were central to *Children Achieving* and those held by most of the district's teaching staff. Little attention was given to altering the views of teachers. Rather it was assumed that they would see the wisdom of the reform, embrace its tenets, and change their behavior.

Overloaded by the reforms, many school staffs were unable to focus their efforts to improve. They could not translate mandates into clearly defined and manageable instructional priorities. This resulted in widespread frustration among teachers and principals. Principals especially felt disempowered and disrespected as they received one directive after another from the cluster offices. To make matters worse, district leaders seldom sought their input and the supports and resources needed to get the job done were often not available or arrived late. The "all at once" theory also contributed to poor sequencing of the reform initiatives since all tasks had the same priority. For example, the accountability system was in place several years before the curriculum frameworks offered teachers guidance about the kinds of curricular and instructional strategies that would help students meet the standards.

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# Lessons Learned

*"The reforms created fatigue and resistance among teachers, and disempowered principals. Initial support from the business community evaporated and civic leaders became exasperated with the intractability of the reform plan and its leader. Children Achieving raised hopes in Philadelphia, but left the city confused and anxious."*

In one respect, the Philadelphia story is like a Greek tragedy. A noble cause, a committed leader, and a grand plan were undone by the failure of the state and city to provide adequate funding, by lack of understanding of what it takes to change schools, by poor implementation, and in some cases by the unwillingness of powerful groups to work together on behalf of children.

In another sense, it is like a Russian novel. Idealists sought to do too much, all at once. Well-intended people who thought that by moving quickly and broadly they would create a groundswell of support for change instead met with opposition and apathy. The reforms created fatigue and resistance among teachers, and disempowered principals. Initial support from the business community evaporated and civic leaders became exasperated with the intractability of the reform plan and its leader.

*Children Achieving* raised hopes in Philadelphia, but left the city confused and anxious. Is there a way to improve urban schools? What is it? There are some important lessons to be drawn from *Children Achieving*. They fall into two categories: those that apply to almost all efforts to improve teaching and learning, and those that are specific to systemic approaches to reform.

## *Remedial Lessons about Teaching and Learning*

Some of the lessons learned in Philadelphia have already been "learned" from the experiences with other reforms in other cities. Too often reformers repeat the mistakes of others, failing to learn from these previous experiences or from research. This was true in Philadelphia. Among these lessons are:

- Content standards and accountability measures offer a foundation for instructional change, but produce results only if teachers are provided the time and support necessary to develop high-quality curricula and to alter their classroom methods. For many teachers in Philadelphia, closing the gaps between the pre-reform curriculum, their own content knowledge, and their beliefs about what their students can learn, and the new standards set under *Children Achieving* was a difficult task. Given the severe time pressures set by the accountability system and the inadequate guidance and support provided for them, many opted for drilling students for the test. Achieving the deeper changes in classroom practice and the rigorous curriculum that the architects of the new standards had envisioned would have required more guidance, demonstration proofs, richer learning opportunities, much more time, and greater understanding and sensitivity to the daily challenges of teaching urban classrooms.
- Curriculum-based, sustained professional development is essential to instructional change. Providing teachers with high-quality opportunities to master content and pedagogy, model curriculum units, and ongoing support from accomplished teachers produces results.
- The effects of teacher hiring practices, teacher retention, and teacher transfers on the distribution of teacher talent and the capacity of schools to make improvements must be addressed. Incentives are needed to recruit and retain new teachers, especially in the middle grades, and policies are needed



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to encourage master teachers to practice in the most challenging schools.

- Too much reform can overload the schools and teachers. Focus on a few things. Do them well and demonstrate that better results are possible. Stay focused, be persistent, and build demand for the next set of changes. Pilot new approaches to demonstrate that they are effective. As teachers see improvements in one area, as they come to believe that students can do the work, they will be more willing and better equipped to take on the next challenge.
- Different strategies are needed for high schools. One can't hold high school staffs accountable for meeting high standards when students are arriving in ninth grade lacking skills essential to academic success. Districts need a catch-up strategy and they need to prepare high school staffs to implement it.
- Win over the teachers. You should not blame them for social ills they didn't create or accuse them of not caring or working hard just because test scores are low. Ultimately, success depends on their commitment and their sense of personal accountability.
- Prepare staff at all levels of the system for the new roles and responsibilities called for in the reforms. Structural changes demand that people behave in new ways and they need support in learning the new behaviors.
- Early intervention to help children acquire the language skills needed for success in school is critical. Full-day kindergarten appears to have positively impacted student progress in Philadelphia, and concentrating on language arts in the early elementary years may have had the most impact on student performance. However, the city of Philadelphia failed to respond to the district's efforts to expand and improve early childhood programs. The superintendent offered a plan but it was rebuffed by other city agencies. Questions of who was in charge apparently took precedence over increasing children's access to good programs. As a consequence, an opportunity to lay a solid foundation for the improvement of the public schools was missed.

## *New Lessons about Systemic Reform*

A first lesson about systemic reform concerns the trade-offs between alignment and autonomy. *Children Achieving* had at least one serious design flaw. As described in the literature, systemic reform assumes well-aligned accountability and assessment systems *and* school control and development of curriculum. The idea is that a central authority (a state or, in Philadelphia's case, the central office) sets content and performance standards and holds schools accountable, but in turn the schools are granted the opportunity to develop means of reaching the standards. In the theory, this includes control over their curriculum. What we believe to be a basic flaw in this theory is that well-aligned accountability and assessment systems either presume or lead to a fairly uniform curriculum. If a central authority wants to hold schools accountable for what students learn, its assessment system must test what teachers teach or to put it another way, teachers must know what will be tested and it is likely that this is what they will teach. Therefore, in such a scenario, individual schools and teachers do not determine their own curriculum. They teach a curriculum determined by the standards and assessments. A well-aligned system is not tolerant of multiple curricula, developed by individual teachers and schools.

The School District of Philadelphia lived out this contradiction as they worked to implement *Children Achieving*. Initially, central office staff focused on decentralizing authority to schools and giving school staff the opportunity to make their own decisions. They set standards and established an accountability mechanism that included incentives for schools to improve their performance. They were criticized because the district test did not perfectly align with the standards, so they worked to improve the alignment. Results from testing and other measures, however, continually pointed out wide disparities in outcomes and opportunities to learn for low-

income students, students of color, and English language learners so the central office sought to even the playing field. As the Hornbeck administration came to an end, central office staff and the Board of Education were developing tests in every subject area for grades 7-12 in order to clearly signal to teachers what to teach. Only a year after Hornbeck left, the central office was working on a districtwide curriculum — in response to teacher demand. The shift from the promise of autonomy to a common curriculum was dramatic.

Ironically, throughout the reform effort, personnel in the field perceived most actions of the central office as mandates, even their efforts to decentralize authority. Because the decision to decentralize was made centrally, and related policies were designed with little consultation with the field, school and cluster personnel experienced decentralization as a set of central office mandates, rather than opportunities for school autonomy. And there was little evidence that the schools were ready and eager to take control of curriculum in Philadelphia. Teachers consistently called for more specific guidelines about what and how to teach.

Philadelphia's leaders equated school autonomy with control over curriculum. One need not presume the other. School districts considering systemic reform efforts might grant schools control over other aspects of their operation — budgets, staffing, and professional development, for example — while maintaining a centralized curriculum. Alternatively, school districts could develop a curriculum that covered some proportion of the school year, leaving schools and teachers free to determine how to use the remaining time. Districtwide assessments would focus on the mandated curriculum.

A second lesson to be drawn about systemic reform is about standards, how they become ubiquitous, and how they can undermine the increased autonomy that they are supposed to provide to schools and teachers. Under *Children Achieving*, one of the functions of the central office was to set standards. As the central office staff recognized the need to provide schools with more guidance about how to carry out the reforms, they drew on their authority to set standards to provide it. In addition to content and performance standards, the central office staff defined "process" standards that spelled out acceptable practice in a variety of areas. They set standards for local school councils, small learning communities, professional development, teaching practice, project learning, service learning, the comprehensive support process, and so on. The standards were perceived by central office staff as a benign form of guidance, and as being different from mandates. The label, in their view, implied advocacy for quality rather than an exercise of authority and control.

However, to school staff, these "process" standards were just prescriptions in another form. And as cluster and central office staff used these various sets of standards to determine whether schools were complying with the reforms, they clearly were viewed as regulatory mandates. Calling them standards did not change the fact that they felt like regulations to the school staffs.

Other districts can learn from this experience. If the idea of standards is to define an ideal state of affairs, then deviation should be expected, and permitted, across contexts. This is especially true of "process" standards. In a decentralized environment, the central office could acknowledge that deviations are expected, maybe even encourage them, and focus on the results rather than on compliance. Or they could define parameters of acceptable behavior and the conditions under which deviations would be permitted. It is probably important to distinguish between standards and regulations. The former imply some professional legitimacy, some basis in knowledge or experience, while the latter are simply the operationalization of policies that may or may not have such grounding.

## In Conclusion

*"The reform raised expectations for Philadelphia's children, made public the grim reality of the conditions in the schools, forced a discussion among citizens about the future of public education in Philadelphia and pressured the state into action to change the political and legal structure of public education in the city...But in the end, the high hopes that greeted this ambitious reform were not fulfilled."*

A combination of factors contributed to *Children Achieving's* failure to produce sustained improvements and deep changes in practice. These included: flaws in the theory of action itself, flaws in implementation, lack of capacity and lack of attention to building it, and behavior inconsistent with the beliefs and values underlying the reform effort.[27]

Reformers encouraged business, civic, and grassroots leaders and parents to believe that standards, accountability, and decentralization would bring improvements in student performance. As achievement data showed that these strategies were inadequate, they did not help business and civic leaders understand that the plan needed to be revised. There was not an understanding in the community that the reform plan was a living document and modifications based on experience were essential to its ultimate success.

As Christman noted, "...the selling of systemic reform as comprehensive common sense and as a package that 'all had to be done at once,' undercut the possibility for the input and accommodations necessary for building alliances for reform. It discouraged critical questions, reflection, and revision — all necessary for organizational learning."[28] Without strong support from stakeholders, systemic reform is hard to sustain: progress is too slow, and communities too impatient.

Central office celebratory rhetoric further eroded support from civic, political, and business leaders as they struggled to understand the discordance between the claims of district leadership, the complaints of teachers, and the continuing reality of low student achievement scores. In the end, the complexity of the design coupled with inadequate resources and support and a failure to win support from teachers combined to bring *Children Achieving* to an end. This is not to say that nothing was accomplished. The reform raised expectations for Philadelphia's children, made public the grim reality of the conditions in the schools, forced a discussion among citizens about the future of public education in Philadelphia, and pressured the state into action to change the political and legal structure of public education in the city. The elementary schools did show significant gains in student performance and the introduction of full-day kindergarten and early literacy programs ensured that the city's children would have additional support as they began their school careers. But in the end, the high hopes that greeted this ambitious reform were not fulfilled.

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[26] Gold, Rhodes, Brown, Lytle, and Waff, *Clients, consumers, or collaborators?*

[27] Foley, *Contradictions and control in systemic reform.*

[28] Christman and Rhodes, *Civic engagement and urban school improvement.*

# Appendix A
# Additional Reading on *Children Achieving*

The following following publications on the evaluation of *Children Achieving* are currently available through CPRE at (215) 573-0700, or email your requests to cpre@gse.upenn.edu. Copies can also be downloaded at http://www.cpre.org/Research/Research_Project_Children_Achieving.htm.

- **Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Keys to Improving the Philadelphia Public Schools**, by Susan Watson (May 2001)
- **School Leadership and Reform: Case Studies of Philadelphia Principals**, by Mary Helen Spiri (May 2001)
- **Contradictions and Control in Systemic Reform: The Ascendancy of the Central Office in Philadelphia Schools**, by Ellen Foley (August 2001)
- **Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000**, by Eva Gold, Amy Rhodes, Shirley Brown, Susan Lytle, and Diane Waff (August 2001)
- **Case Studies of a Systemic Reform in Urban Schools**, by Susan Watson, Rhonda Phillips, Claire Passantino, Jolley Bruce Christman, Nancy Lawrence, Theresa Luhm, and Hitomi Yoshida (October 2001)
- **Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools**, by Jolley Bruce Christman (December 2001)
- **An Analysis of the Effect of *Children Achieving* on Student Achievement in Philadelphia Elementary Schools**, by Erin Tighe, Aubrey Wang, and Ellen Foley (February 2002)
- **Civic Engagement and Urban School Improvement: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia**, by Jolley Bruce Christman and Amy Rhodes (June 2002)

The following publications on the evaluation of *Children Achieving* are available exclusively from CPRE's web site at http://www.cpre.org/Research/Research_Project_Children_Achieving.htm.

- **The Accountability System: Defining Responsibility for Student Achievement**, by Theresa Luhm, Ellen Foley, and Tom Corcoran (Spring 1998)
- ***Children Achieving*: Philadelphia's Education Reform, A Second-year Evaluation**, Executive Summary (Spring 1998)
- **Guidance for School Improvement in a Decentralizing System: How Much, What Kind, and From Where?**, by Jolley Bruce Christman (Spring 1998)
- **Making Sense of Standards: Implementation Issues and the Impact on Teaching Practice**, by Elaine Simon, Ellen Foley, and Claire Passantino (Spring 1998)
- **Restructuring Student Support Services: Redefining the Role of the School District**, by Ellen Foley (Spring 1998)

# Appendix B
# *Children Achieving* Evaluation Research Methods

In 1996, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania and its partner, Research for Action (RFA), were charged by the *Children Achieving* Challenge with the evaluation of *Children Achieving*. Between the 1995-1996 and 2000-2001 school years, CPRE and RFA researchers interviewed hundreds of teachers, principals, parents, students, District officials, and civic leaders; sat in on meetings where the plan was designed, debated, and revised; observed its implementation in classrooms and schools; conducted two system-wide surveys of teachers; and carried out independent analyses of the District's test results and other indicators of system performance. An outline of the research methods used by CPRE and RFA follows.

1. 1996-2000 school-level data on indicators that made up the District's Performance Responsibility Index including student scores on the SAT-9, student promotion and graduation rates, student attendance, and teacher attendance.
2. Two census surveys of teachers, the first in 1997 and the second in 1999. Teachers were asked about reform implementation, school conditions, and teaching practices. There was a greater than 60 percent response rate on both surveys.
3. School indicators describing teacher and student characteristics in 1996 and 1999 obtained from the School District of Philadelphia's Information Services. These data included school enrollment, number of teachers, the proportion of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, among other indicators. These data were used for descriptive purposes and in hierarchical linear and logistic regression models to help understand the relationships among reform implementation, student outcomes, and school characteristics.
4. Five years (1995-1996 through 1999-2000) of qualitative research in 49 schools (26 elementary, 11 middle, and 12 high schools) in 14 clusters. Qualitative research included: interviews of teachers, principals, parents, outside partners who worked in the schools, and in a few cases, students; observations of classrooms, small learning communities meetings, professional development sessions, and school leadership team meetings; review of school documents (School Improvement Plan, budget, etc.); and intensive, multi-year case study research in a subset of 25 schools (13 elementary, 5 middle, and 7 high schools).
5. Interviews of central office and cluster staff and observations of meetings and other events.
6. Interviews of 40 Philadelphia civic leaders (including political leaders, leaders in the funding community, public education advocates, journalists, and business leaders).

In addition, numerous other studies conducted during *Children Achieving* informed this evaluation. These included: Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett's three-year interview study of middle school students; an evaluation of the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative in Mathematics and Science conducted by Research for Action; the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study conducted by Frank Furstenberg at the University of Pennsylvania; and the evaluation of the William Penn Foundation's initiative in two clusters, conducted by the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching.

## *Consortium for Policy Research in Education*

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) unites five of the nation's leading research institutions to improve elementary and secondary education through research on policy, finance, school reform, and school governance. Members of CPRE are the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

CPRE studies alternative approaches to education reform in order to determine how state and local policies can promote student learning. Currently, CPRE's work is focusing on accountability policies, efforts to build capacity at various levels within the education system, methods of allocating resources and compensating teachers, and governance changes like charters and mayoral takeover. The results of this research are shared with policymakers, educators, and other interested individuals and organizations in order to promote improvements in policy design and implementation.

## *Research for Action*

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization engaged in educational research and reform. Founded in 1992, RFA works with educators, students, parents, and community members to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. RFA work falls along a continuum of highly participatory research to more traditional policy studies that use qualitative methods and case study analysis. RFA also seeks to inform the national dialogue about strong schools and effective education through reports and journal articles, conference presentations, videos, and collaboration with other school reform groups.

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Consortium for Policy Research in Education

Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
3440 Market Street, Suite 560
Philadelphia, PA 19104-3325
Telephone 215.573.0700
Fax 215.573.7914
www.cpre.org

*Research for Action*

International House
3701 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Telephone 215.823.2500
Fax 215.823.2510
www.researchforaction.org

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